

Self-Editing Tricks I Use

By Linda Rohrbough

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I think the bane of my existence as a writer, besides people saying, “If you’ll write my great story idea, I’ll let you split the money,” is when I find some stupid error in my manuscript. My most painful blunders are the stuff elementary school kids could find, which is part of the reason they’re so embarrassing. Of course, I find the error after I’ve sent the work or during a read. This isn’t just a problem with manuscripts—it happens in my letters and faxes, too. In my attempts to solve this distressing problem, I’ve found a few tricks I’d like to pass on.

I’d love to have my own private editor, someone I could call, well, on a whim. Someone I could rush along, is always supportive, and who works for free—did I mention that? OK, so that’s not going to happen. But I’m a decent editor, who fits those criteria, if I’ve gotten far enough from my work that I can’t remember what I said. Which brings me to tip one: if you can sit on whatever you’ve written for long enough to forget what you said, you can usually catch any glaring errors. For example, I made posters for a Friends of the Library book sale, and when I got to the sale, I found the mistakes there in large print, to the great amusement of the patrons and librarians alike. If I’d done the posters the night before, I’d have caught those errors the next morning.

If planning ahead is not your strong suit (and it isn’t mine) my second trick might help. I’ve found errors easily when I read my manuscript aloud to myself. This technique works best on things I can’t read at a glance. For this to work, I make myself read every word. I’ve found many a glaring error, as well as awkward sentence structure and even plot problems this way.

Then there are those times when I’m just sick of the darn thing, but I need to get it out the door. Which leads me to my third and most recent discovery, and the most exciting one to date--I’ve found ReadPlease, free software that will read text to me from my PC. If I want to pay just under \$100, I can get a version of ReadPlease that will allow me to choose from interesting male and female voices with accents that sound pretty close to real people. I can also have the software read from within Microsoft Word, if I want to pay extra. But I’m cheap and I haven’t needed any more than a straight computer voice to catch my problems. So I cut the text from Word, paste it into the free version of ReadPlease, let it read, then jump back and forth between the two programs to edit.

Using ReadPlease, I’ve found those cut and paste errors where a preposition gets left out, like “Harry drowned the lake” instead of “Harry drowned in the lake.” I’ve also found extra words, like “Zeb may could keep the gold,” a result of when I change my mind about the phrasing and forget to delete. I’ve also found run-on sentences and stuff I just didn’t like the sound of.

Part of the reason ReadPlease offers a free version is text-to-speech capability is already available in the Windows operating system. It’s a setting for handicapped people. (I certainly feel I qualify there.) While you can make text-to-speech work in Windows, it can be hard to do. I’ve found the free version of ReadPlease convenient and easy to use. I can control the speed of the read and the size of the text on the screen. ReadPlease is a huge help to me for last minute, rush projects as well as for my regular self-editing work.

And it will read the same stuff to me over and over without getting tired, bored or giving me attitude.

Using these techniques, especially ReadPlease, I've cut down my red-faced moments. In fact, I can't remember the last time I got caught with a careless mistake. Now if I could only eliminate the other mistakes. Well, that's what the critique sessions are for, right?

Sidebar:

Linda's Self-Editing Tricks:

1. Get away from your work long enough to forget it, then come back for a fresh look.
2. Read your work aloud to yourself--say every word.
3. Use text-to-speech software to have your work read to you. I recommend the free version of ReadPlease, available for download at www.ReadPlease.com.

BIO

Linda Rohrbough has been writing about the computer industry since 1989 and has more than 5,000 articles and five books to her credit. Her work has been honored three times by the Computer Press Association. Two of her books were named best general book of the year and she was awarded first place in the on-line news category for her work in cyberspace. She is currently at work on a techno-thriller novel. E-mail Linda at Linda@PCbios.com or visit her website www.PCbios.com.